

CHRISTIANE MORTELIER

Waimea, Kaua'i in 1839: An Account by Louis Thiercelin, Whaling Doctor

INTRODUCTION

THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT of Doctor Louis Thiercelin's visit to the island of Kaua'i in 1839 is translated from his major work, *Journal d'un baleinier* (*A Whaler's Journal*), and the brief account of his life has been pieced together from archives and gleaned from his published writings and recently discovered unpublished letters to his second wife.¹

A LIFE OF LOUIS THIERCELIN

Louis Thiercelin was born at Boiscommun, a village in the Loiret, France, on April 20, 1809. He died in his Paris home, 15 rue Lamennais, on May 14, 1884. He was awarded the Legion of Honour by a decree of September 26, 1848 for "his care of the wounded at Meung, Loiret."

Thiercelin's father was a draper and haberdasher who owned properties at Chateauneuf, Damoy, and Meung-sur-Loire. His ancestors lived in the Loire Valley for generations. Joan of Arc's godmother was a Thiercelin, and there were indeed two Thiercelin brothers in her army when she came to the Loire from Lorraine in 1429. Four centuries later there were many families by the name of Thiercelin scattered over the Loire Valley area.

Christiane Mortelier is a member of the faculty of the French Section, School of European Languages, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

The Hawaiian Journal of History, vol. 26 (1992)

Louis Thiercelin studied science and medicine in Paris and obtained his degree as a Doctor of Medicine on August 21, 1832.² He married young and was practicing medicine at Meru, Oise, where the births of three daughters were recorded in 1834, 1835, and 1837. In 1837, he embarked as a ship's surgeon on the *Ville de Bordeaux* for his first whaling expedition which took him around the world over a period of four years.³ While he was away, his eldest daughter Adele and his wife Louise Desiree Bayle both died, in 1838. It seems probable that his parents looked after his other two daughters at Meung-sur-Loire.⁴ His second wife, whom he married on October 6, 1856, was Juana Josefa de la Merced Ravelo, a widow from Caracas, Venezuela, who had three children from a first marriage. They had one daughter, Louise Isabelle Thiercelin, born in Paris on August 29, 1857. The letters exchanged by the couple vouch for their mutual and enduring affection, even though financial problems seem to have arisen repeatedly, prompting Doctor Thiercelin to exert himself considerably all his life to court an ever elusive fortune.

Thiercelin made three trips around the world. On his first voyage, on the *Ville de Bordeaux* from January 5, 1837 to January 5, 1841, he called at Kaua'i in September 1839 and at Akaroa, New Zealand in the summer months of 1839-1840. The ship was later impounded in Australia, and the Doctor was forced to find his own way back home. The second trip began November 17, 1861 and took Thiercelin along the coast of Africa on the *Leopard*, under Captain Maynard, to experiment with the new technique he had invented to shorten the struggling of whales by striking them with a poisoned explosive. His idea was supported by Emile Bossiere of Le Havre, who was the last of the great French whaling ship owners. The trip was cut short by illness, and by May 1862 he was back home.

He tried again to prove convincingly that he had found the solution to make whaling safer, embarking on the *Gustave*, under Captain Gilles, and sailed from Le Havre on April 3, 1863. The ship called briefly at Arama, north New Caledonia, and for almost three weeks at Chatham Island. Although whales were hard to find, the Doctor managed to carry out his experiments and proved his point, though the whaling crews were reluctant to

adopt his invention, afraid they would be contaminated when handling the flesh of the whales killed by his poisoned explosives. In February 1864, shortly after arriving at Akaroa, Captain Gilles died, and the Doctor had to assist the mate, Mr. Vaulpre, to take the *Gustave* back to the French authorities in Tahiti, where he decided to leave the ship. He returned to France via South America on the cargo ship *Ferdinand de Lesseps*.

While waiting for transport in Tahiti, Thiercelin had time to observe the mixed blessings brought by colonization to the island. Only a few weeks earlier, he had found Akaroa, where he had spent several months bay whaling in 1839–1840, also much altered by European settlement. So he decided to record his observations on the Pacific territories he had visited and naturally thought back on his first visit some 24 years earlier when European expansion had hardly touched some of these places. The result is his major book, *Journal d'un baleinier*.

COMMENTS ON THE JOURNAL

The *Journal* reads like the memoirs of a cultured European who happened to travel on whaling ships and visited faraway lands and strange races at a time when the Pacific region was in the throes of colonization by rivaling French, English, and American powers. It is not a typical whaler's logbook. The first chapters of Volume I read like a whaling manual, providing information on all aspects of the whaling industry at the time when it was actually dying out in France.⁵ It describes the types of whales and other cetaceans and Thiercelin's innovative technique in making whaling a less dangerous occupation.⁶ The narrative is enlivened with humorous and sometimes tragic tales about life on board, chasing whales, accidents, and storms.

The rest of the *Journal* is really an expanded travel book which tells of the little-known points on the globe visited by the Doctor. It offers an eyewitness account of forgotten people and places scattered along the whaling routes: indigenous peoples, missionaries, early settlers, and their interaction with sailors and sea captains. As he comes in contact with them—following the example of the earlier navigators—the narrator reminds his readers of the salient

moment in their history and adds a summary on local productions and customs. The Doctor's wide readings set the stage for personal observations, anecdotes, and philosophical remarks, so much so that the *Journal d'un baleinier* becomes a first-class historical and sociological document.

Six of the nine chapters concern Pacific islands where he called during his trips, and the information they contain contributes to make the *Journal* a prime source of Pacific social history from the late 1830s to the mid 1860s. The fact that he had no vested interest in politics, religion, or commerce gives greater validity to his testimony.

As his two voyages throughout the Pacific were 25 years apart, he makes a point of underlining the impact of European ways on all aspects of Native life, notices signs of physical degradation in indigenous people, contrasts methods of colonization of French, English, German, and American settlers, and governmental attitudes. On the strength of his personal experience of the Pacific, he feels competent to evaluate their results so far and to recommend a less rigid colonial administration to his French contemporaries in particular.

The island of Kaua'i may have been the first tropical island he visited in September 1839, after months spent chasing the whale in the cold waters of Bering and the North Pacific. He never called there again, but the smallest details remained fresh in his mind, rekindled by his recent stay in Tahiti. This partly accounts for his glowing evocation of Native life on Kaua'i and his praise of the efficient colonizing methods of the American missionaries on the island. He was acutely aware of the changes at work in all the islands, and he felt he could open the eyes of his French readers to alternative ways and to the pitfalls of colonization in the Pacific region, while reminding them of their duties towards indigenous peoples. These ideas form the conclusion of Chapter IX. Section I is an account of life on Kaua'i as he had known it in 1839. Section II covers the past of the Hawaiian Islands and dwells at some length on the figure of Kamehameha I, his conquests, and the social revolution he accomplished, down to the 1860s.

Mercy Whitney's manuscript diary, in which she regularly recorded her daily occupations and the few notable events of her

life as a missionary wife on Kaua'i, tells us about the arrival of the *Ville de Bordeaux* in Waimea on September 18, 1839.

Sept. 23. The 18th inst. a French whaleship anchored at this place. It was with no very pleasant sensations that we saw it come, after the treatment which Miss has recently received from that nation. But the Capt. & officers appear polite & friendly, & the crew are quite civil for sailors. . . .⁷

Mercy Whitney also reports the departure of the *Ville de Bordeaux* a few days after October 10. She confirms the Doctor's account and fills in a few gaps, while her remarks form a pedestrian counterpart to his picture of life at Waimea. Little did he know, however, he had been shrewdly observed by Mercy Whitney while he was despatching her as a nonentity.

Oct. 10. The French ship left Waimea several days ago. . . . Mr. Chiercelin [sic] appeared to be a very interesting young man, tho' he could speak scarcely a work of Eng. He called at our 'house' one day alone, as he was returning from a walk several miles in the hot sun. . . . He tried hard to converse with us, principally by signs, but we found it rather difficult to understand what he wished to communicate. . . .

Doctor Thiercelin's spelling of Hawaiian differs from modern standard practice which has been adopted here, except for his first reference to "Atouai" (Kaua'i). He was not a fluent speaker of English and Polynesian languages and transcribed unfamiliar names through the phonetic practice of his own language. His spelling of Hawaiian words is similar to that of earlier French visitors to Hawai'i, such as Louis de Freycinet and Jacques Arago.

JOURNAL D'UN BALEINER, Chapter IX SECTION I ATOUAI

I have left Tahiti. The *Ferdinand de Lesseps* is taking me towards France where I hope to be back soon. We are taking the long way home though. Instead of going directly to Cape Horn, first we

have to visit Valparaiso, then go on to Peru where we have to pickup a cargo of saltpetre, and return to France after a long detour. . . . Today I finished my experiments on the fishing process I had devised. They were as successful as circumstances allowed. I shall leave it to others to continue my work. . . . as far as I am concerned, my task is over. During my trip, I have seen and studied several colonies in Oceania; I have expressed my opinion on the lands and the men who live there, I shall now end my book with a few thoughts about colonization in general, and the various methods I have seen in use.

Finally I shall ask what Europeans could have done had they been inspired solely by the love of mankind, by the desire to be really helpful to the races living in Oceania, particularly the fine yellow race of Polynesia.

[Doctor Thiercelin recalls his visit to the Hawaiian Islands in 1839.]

Towards the end of September 1839, on our way back from Bering, the *Ville de Bordeaux* spent a few days in Waimea bay at Kaua'i. Once we were a few miles out and within sight of the harbor, we hoisted the national flag and the pilot's flag. We hoped they would acknowledge our signal, however there was no flag in sight. Later on we learnt that our arrival had caused great anxiety on the island.⁸ The ship was very big and looked like a frigate; as manoeuvres were done with great precision and speed, the islands thought they were confronted by a French warship, and as previously there had been some difficulties among missionaries belonging to various persuasions, they imagined we were hostile. Everyone was terrified.

In a fort⁹ which overlooks the bay, they had collected a few cannons in rather poor condition and a hundred rusty rifles. The commandant called up the islanders to defend the fortress; however as he did not have a permanent force, he had no means of gathering willing men among those who were watching our manoeuvre. Indeed none of them was willing. Every man capable of holding a rifle preferred taking a walk in the mountains rather than keeping a watch behind the walls of a dilapidated fort. So the commandant had no other option but to run after the deserters. The fort looked after itself. As for us, we were left to tack about,

much annoyed at not seeing anyone show up. Finally, a few canoes drew near and an hour later, several hundred canoes surrounded the ship. All the Hawaiians wanted to see us and kept circling the ship, deafening us with their cackle. All these bare brown-skinned men were quite a sight; from a distance they seemed to be sitting in the water with no other support than the water itself. As they drew closer, one realized they were sitting on the rails of such narrow canoes that [one would have thought] they would have been unable to get into them.

These little canoes which they call canouts, are dug out of tree trunks and each end, which is as pointed as a dolphin's head, is gracefully uplifted into a point. The bigger ones have a shining yellow forecastle made of wood at both ends, and side panels cleverly fitted. They are all built with a consummate skill all the more surprising since the tools used in making them are not known. It would be almost impossible to stay afloat in such skiffs without fear of overturning, were they not balanced with an outrigger, or light wooden arm placed parallel to the canoe and tied to it by semi-circular sticks. Owing to that device, the boat is safe enough . . . providing the rider takes care to lean on the outrigger arm, nevertheless it sometimes overturns and when the native has managed to empty the water with a calabash while swimming beside the canoe, he is able to climb back into it quite easily.

[The Doctor gives a full description of Polynesian canoes and the ways to handle them; then he explains local fishing techniques and fishing tackle.]

Their lines, made of a fine bark of mulberry¹⁰ string twisted between fingers, are very strong though quite fine. A sharp bone or iron hook is attached to the end; then the line is wound around a little stone with the hook and bait and the whole thing is dropped overboard; the little ball unwinds and as soon as the stone is loose, the bait is taken by the fish. The fisherman feels the pull, quickly draws up the line and throws his catch into the boat. . . .

[We are introduced to the local pilot, an old Englishman named William.]¹¹

Old William had been at Kaua'i for about thirty years. He had witnessed the last wars which took place before Kamehameha's

conquest.¹² He was considered as a compatriot by the inhabitants and had almost forgotten he had been born far away from that place. What was he like thirty years before, when he was young and active? I never found out. He had probably been a sailor, and deserted and settled at Kaua'i when the island was independent, had worked, married and slowly aged there. . . . during our call, he was living fairly comfortably. We were soon to become better acquainted with him.

When the ship had anchored, the sails furled and the whole population assured of our peaceful intentions, overconfidence replaced their previous excessive fear. The deck was literally covered with natives and their talk was so noisy that we could not hear one another. Every minute, the word *kanaka* [man, human, person] was repeated, just like the word "*maoury*"¹³ in New Zealand. We even noticed something which did not really trouble us yet made us think. To climb aboard, the natives had abandoned their canoes and did not seem to worry about being two miles away from the land without any means of transport. We thought they wanted to stay with us indefinitely, and as an increase in the population would have starved the shop and created problems, the captain tried to get rid of them before going ashore himself. He beckoned to all the visitors to leave promptly, and with exemplary obedience they climbed on the rails and dived into the water as a troop of seals would at the sight of hunters. None of them got close to the boats, they swam all the way to the island which they reached within an hour. You could truly say that they were swimming like fish. Not a single woman was among them. In this I could see the influence of the missionaries. It may be that excessive severity had curtailed native freedom.

We soon went ashore accompanied by William who offered to be our interpreter. We had hardly set foot on the beach when we were literally carried by the crowd pressing around us. Our long boat had been seized by forty or fifty strong arms just as it touched the breakers which might have endangered our landing, and was dragged onto the sand away from the surf. On our way to good old William's hut there were so many sightseers that we could not walk. They were mostly young girls who were making up for having deprived themselves of the pleasure of going

on board; they followed us closely almost touching us, brushing past our clothes, pressing our hands then withdrawing a little ashamed, they seemed to take it as a pleasurable duty to escort us laughing and repeating a thousand times "Palani, Palani" [France, Frenchman]. . . . The young men—tall, well-made, with finely-drawn muscles—were a joy to behold and their yellow skin was not at all unpleasant; sometimes it tends to brown, at other times to white; soft to the touch and shining, their bare bodies are so much finer than thin faded and wan Europeans' bodies, generally covered with clothes. Their hair is black and curly when long enough; unfortunately, it is often cut in a rather unsightly manner in a simple crown or a tuft on top of their head. Older men are generally fat, but they are tall enough to carry their weight with ease and even with a certain dignity. As we were surrounded mostly by young girls on our first walk, I had time to notice how beautiful some of them were. Their overall appearance was most pleasing, with their hair tied up and held in a kind of net, their open faces full of laughter, showing fleshy lips and a fine set of teeth, their noses a trifle big yet never flat, and their well-shaped black eyes. Their physical attributes—small, firm breasts like marble globes, lithe and soft bodies, finely shaped arms and legs, small feet and delicate hands—certainly coincided with the type of Polynesian female I had imagined. So how is it that 25 years later, finding myself in Tahiti where I faced the same race, I could no longer enthuse about the physical appearance of the women I saw there?

Is it because degradation is proceeding at a disastrous pace? Or is it simply because I am 25 years older and do not see with the same eyes nor judge with the same enthusiasm as I once did? I do not know.

But I look back fondly on the young girls of Kaua'i while my recent memories of Tahiti are more painful than pleasant. The few elderly women I saw seemed to be extremely fat, so much so that they had to keep their legs well apart in order to be able to walk. . . .

[A description of Native clothing follows; the "maro" [malo, loincloth] is praised for its simplicity and decency and because:]
 . . . it does not hamper the development of their handsome bod-

ies. On Kaua'i I saw neither hunchback nor lame person, nobody hiding their skinny, sickly bodies under a few rags as in our cities. It was just the opposite, and up to thirty years old, every man would have been a suitable model for painters and sculptors.

I frequently noticed two other types of garments: a piece of cloth one metre and a half long by approximately sixty centimetres wide, with a hole in the middle for the head. One might think they copied the Catholic priest's chasuble. It is worn mostly by young men. Adults and elderly men wear a large piece of cloth tied on the right shoulder, similar to that of the Ancient Greeks. When a handsome old man comes forward with a majestic gait, draped in his coat, with a large straw hat on the head and a long red wooden stick in his hand, he looks as dignified as a Roman senator or a bishop in a great Holy procession.

[Women's clothing is also described.]

More out of coquetry than decency, some wear a band of material like a scarf over one of their breasts, the other remaining uncovered. The ends of the scarf are hidden in their belt. Their curly hair is plaited and decorated with feathers in a most elegant manner. Fashion which comes in everywhere has already replaced this picturesque costume with a long dress or dressing gown worn loosely without any belt. I saw the same dress in Tahiti twenty-five years later. A woven straw hat completes this new costume. A woman really needs to be particularly good-looking if she does not want to look at her worst in such a dress, especially when a pair of heavy sailor's boots is added to it. Beauties wear it nevertheless and most elderly women wear it too. . . . The national material is made out of the inner bark of the paper mulberry. . . . The fibres of this second layer of bark are set in plenty of gum; pieces of various sizes are placed above one another, and beaten down into reasonably thin long leaves, some of them up to five or six metres long. Belts, coats and dresses are made out of this fibre which rustles like paper though it is stronger. It has been so thoroughly beaten and dried that water does not break it up. Real mats painted in bright colors—red, yellow and green—have been made with it and are sufficiently unusual to be attractive to Europeans.

Fashion has changed the style of clothes and brought in foreign

material as well. Calico, floral print, and so on, are replacing mulberry bark named kapa¹⁴ and in a few years perhaps the product of native industry may be looked for in vain. Men of a certain rank wear European clothes made of cloth, cotton trousers, cheap shirts, but they never wear a complete set: a man strutting along in a riding-coat may wear nothing underneath, and another wears a shirt and nothing else. The handsome appearance of the inhabitants tends to disappear with these imported clothes, which are encouraged to create needs thereby instilling a taste for work in the population.

William's hut, which we entered as we waited for an interview with the local authorities, was like all those we could see around us, like the hundred other huts in the village. It was made up of three separate buildings fenced in by posts stuck into the ground. The building we visited contained the living quarters; it was built with long stakes placed upright, and linked with ropes made of hala¹⁵ artistically plaited and spaced at regular intervals. Large and finely-woven mats hanging between stakes made up the side walls. . . . the beaten earth was covered with layers of mats, of which the top ones were very fine and clean. Long thin rafters were tied both to the upright stakes with the plaited ropes already mentioned, and to the top beam which ran the whole length of the hut. The gables were built the same way as the side walls. The whole structure was eight to ten metres long by four or five wide. The hut was divided into two rooms by mats forming a partition. . . .

So as to inform us about the political situation of the country and guide our future conduct, Mr William warned us that the island was governed by a woman who acted as a viceroy or "governess."¹⁶ Here is the story in a few words: King Kamehameha III,¹⁷ a young man in his twenties, had a nurse he loved very much. As the governorship of Kaua'i was vacant, he gave it to his nurse's husband.¹⁸ The governor did not enjoy his great position for long; he had been dead for five or six months when we called, but his wife had been kept in this post until she might be able in due time—by remarrying—to place her new husband at the head of affairs. Thus we were going to be introduced to the "governess". . . . While waiting for her, we tried to explain her absence

and we thought that she tarried because she might be afraid of us. When she saw the ship which, like everybody else, she thought was an enemy ship, the peaceful trustee of authority had taken to riding away followed by her small court towards some shelter practically inaccessible to foreigners. . . . When he learnt that an all-powerful American missionary¹⁹ was present in that land, the captain decided to pay him a visit. So we went through the village again to get to a hillock surrounded by coconut and bread-[fruit] trees; up there we could see a charming little white cottage²⁰ neat and tidy with a garden enclosed within walls. In front of it there was a large iron gate, some orange and banana trees in the garden and a few flowers that had probably been found in the mountain; a small flight of five or six steps led to the entrance door painted green; the cottage seemed to have been placed away from and above the village on purpose, with some intention of retreat and isolation.

On our way we saw huge piles of clay bricks drying in the sun before being used. . . . inspired by the missionary, the Kanaka had been preparing material to build a new temple. . . .

[Doctor Thiercelin explains how bricks are made, then:]
 . . . a fantastic apparition showed up: a young girl with a complexion a trifle darker than I had seen so far, but perfectly regular and charming features, covered in a long white dress, suddenly appeared in front of us; then vanishing between two piles of bricks, she showed up again as suddenly twenty or thirty steps further on, only to disappear again just as fast. . . . When that brown head appeared, when those eyes as bright as diamonds set in ebony black circles had darted their enquiring light on us, when her half-opened mouth had revealed milk-white teeth and her floating garment had left a trail of light in the space she had crossed, we remained fascinated by the apparition. My eyes followed her as long as I could see, I beckoned to her to wait and hurried to catch up with her, but like a ghost from the underworld, she seemed to entice me on, she moved like a shadow without ever beckoning to us; she was only looking at us and smiling, and disappeared only to reappear again further on; in this manner she preceded us to the missionary's house.

Like a will-o'-the-wisp leading travelers towards inhabited

places and vanishing, she too seemed to vanish behind a last pile of bricks. . . . Her father, a Sepoy who had come from India twenty years ago, had married a kanaka woman. A little girl, born of that union, had grown into that fanciful, freakish, extraordinary creature. She did not mix with her contemporaries, and despised them believing she belonged to another race. . . . Let me reassure the reader who could believe that she had totally disappeared as the genuine "Fille de l'Air".²¹ She had not however. This beautiful Indian girl soon lost her shyness, we were able to talk to her and she became one of our best friends.

The honorable Mr Samuel Whitney had been living in Kaua'i for twenty years. He was tall, thin and forty-five years old; his manner was still, formal and rather cold at first, and one needed a while to form a favorable opinion of him. His wife, a shy and sickly creature of forty, seemed to have been created exclusively to look after the house, bake cakes and make tea. So after she had done us the honors of her home in this expected manner, she vanished never to return.

[Joiners' tools are exchanged for goats, as well as one ox and produce with the missionary, who gives the visitors some information about the island's production. Doctor Thiercelin describes the Whitneys' house, the "Governess's" riding habits, impeded as she is by her girth and weight. He attends a "solemn interview" with the captain in the "straw palace," which he describes in great detail, drawing a precise though humorous portrait of the Governess, her court, and the audience whose fine physique he admires greatly. He comments on the marks of mourning shown on the Governess's body and face (teeth missing and tattooing), her gifts of tapa and generous hospitality, while Old William acts as interpreter.]

The governess placed the island at our disposal, promised us all kinds of supplies and even offered to improve our fare by sending her cook to William's where we were to stay for a while; then she adjourned the official meeting by sliding down from the armchair on which she had reluctantly sat in state, to lie flat on her belly over the mats in a comfortable posture which was more familiar to her. Before taking our leave, we talked informally about different subjects, and the captain who prided himself on his gallantry,

pulled from his finger a ring decorated with a fine diamond, offered it to the lady who accepted it with an exclamation of pleasure. . . . The governess provided for our comfort out of her own lumber room; she sent a thick tapa mattress which was wonderfully soft and fresh especially for me. Each leaf of that unusual bed was two metres long by one metre wide, and was remarkably fine. The leaves were piled up to a thickness of 30 centimetres, and held together by ties which ran through them like those used for woollen mattresses; Mrs. William assured me that the governess's delicate attention on my behalf was a special token of friendship. . . .

[The ship's water barrels are taken to the river to be filled.]

Just as the sailors were getting ready to organize the first convoy of full barrels to take on board, a troop of young Kanaka decided to swim with them to the ship. They found it a pleasure to swim the long distance between land and ship, pushing the barrels in front of them. We could see that they had almost become amphibious creatures when, from a distance, we saw them jumping on the barrels, diving under and pushing them along, and talking between themselves all the while, just like coopers would have rolled empty barrels on land. I can say with certainty that you'll never find better swimmers than these islanders anywhere in the world; they swim before they can walk.

[Doctor Thiercelin comments at length on the Hawaiians' love of water, their regular swims, and surfing.]

Children engage in an exercise as attractive as it is fraught with dangers, which may be called swimming with a board. . . over a long surf which seems to begin as far as the eye can see, in order to climb up the coast where it comes to die.

[Thiercelin also recalls an occasion involving the manager's wife of the King's sugar fields which proves that "decency is a virtue common to all Kanaka," for she preferred staying in the middle of the river she was crossing rather than appearing in the nude to French sailors. This leads the writer to comment on the introduction of European clothes among the indigenous population, the exchanges of clothes between locals and visitors, and his own exchange of an old black coat for two fine mats. Exchanging oil for fresh produce leads to a description of the Native lighting system:]

They have a nut as big as a chestnut which contains a very oily pulp.²² Onto very dry wooden fibres, they thread five or six of these nuts and this improvised candle is placed on a piece of wood stuck into the ground; they light the top end of the fibres which acts as a wick, and oil goes up by capillarity burning with a sooty flame. It gives just enough light to dispel the shades of night a little. It is something similar to the resin-candle used in the south of France.

[An anecdote concerning the ship's cook, a braggart Gascon who took advantage of a trusting villager, is mentioned:]

. . . to show the naive generosity of these people often treated so badly by white men, they receive nasty presents in return for their affectionate hospitality. I witnessed so many examples of kindness but I shall only mention two of them which happened to me.

One day, at the end of the village, I was walking on a narrow track at the base of a cliff overgrown with prickly pear. . . .²³ It was hot and I could not see anything else to quench my thirst. However how could I manage to reach the middle of the bush and not get pricked by the sharp thorns? . . . A few young Kanaka passed by and guessing both the object of my desires and the reason for my apprehension, they climbed up the rocks like cats, fetched the fruit and handed them to me, happy to see that I accepted. In my pocket, I found a Chilean coin worth a few cents and I gave it to these kind youngsters, but I had to insist before they accepted it. . . . Another day, during the hottest part of the day, I was walking near a hut in which a Kanaka family was sitting. The husband invited me in for a rest and I gratefully accepted for I was suffering from the heat. The woman left straightway and returning a few minutes later, she brought an enormous watermelon for me. I cut off a slice and ate it with great pleasure, and as I did not have anything to give these kind people, I left my knife behind with the rest of the melon and walked away. I had hardly returned from my walk when the Kanaka woman arrived, bringing back my knife and the melon I had hardly touched. I had the greatest difficulty in the world to make her accept a small coin, and before she retired she invited me several times to visit them again.

[Doctor Thiercelin describes taro fields and other plantations, Native meals, and Polynesian ovens, to conclude that:]

. . . if one compared a roast cooked in tin plate or cast iron with the exquisite food taken out of an oven made of volcanic stones, one would be promptly convinced of the immense superiority of the natural way of cooking over the civilized. It would be like comparing the charms proudly displayed on the chests of the young Kanaka with the deceptive forms—borrowed entirely from some obliging plant—which are to be found in some corsets.

[He goes on to explain how poi is prepared and eaten.]

Each one bends his last two fingers and the right hand thumb while holding his index and middle finger quite straight to plunge them vertically into the paste, and roll some of it into a ball with a little twist. He then puts his fingers in his mouth and withdraws them licked clean. More often than not his fingers do not go directly from the container to his mouth. The person eating goes on talking and joking, or may be preoccupied with some idea. The fingers and the paste seem to bend all on their own, this way and that, so that the paste may not drop, or even lose its rounded shape. . . . Everything down to drinking is conducted in a clean and orderly manner. The calabash is handed round to the guests but hardly touches anyone's lips. Each person takes only a sip and passes the vessel to his neighbor. When this light meal is over, the bowl which was used for hand washing is passed round again. The calabashes are taken away by the woman or a child, and hardly shifting their position, the whole family starts smoking using the same pipe. . . .

All the inhabitants seemed to live in fear of the missionary. I had read that Polynesian dances were interesting and I was most eager to see them, and to hear their national songs as well. To my repeated enquiries, all the natives whether men, women, young or old would answer with these words: "missionary tabu", the missionary forbids it, and I had to be content with that answer. All they offered to sing to me were hymns translated into Kanaka and set to American music. It was a rather inadequate compensation. Only once did I see two young girls dancing a native dance to the accompaniment of their friends' singing. It was a very expressive pantomime, rather similar to what I have seen since in Tahiti and in New Zealand, but it was less brutal than in the latter country and less passionate than in the former. The near nudity of

the dancers, their lithe bodies, the expressive mobility of their faces, their exaggerated gestures, gave them a charm one would look for in vain in the rhythmical though energetic movements of civilized peoples which are almost devoid of expression. I say it again, I only saw this spectacle once, moreover the dancers really seemed afraid to be discovered lest they incur a long and severe punishment. . . .

The natives' amorous temperament does not lend itself easily to the demands of Protestantism. This religion has for a number of years taken a hold over the islands. Consequently the population has acquired a surface layer of hypocrisy which spoils their nice disposition, and might deceive a superficial observer as to the moral condition of the country. If one goes to the bottom of things, it is soon realized that the natives are still more or less the same.

If during the day our sailors' amatory approaches were snubbed in no uncertain way, they made up for this as soon as the sun had dipped below the horizon. Every night we could see young girls roaming around our hut, later to disappear taking with them persons of their choice, to whom they were presumably going to impart practical instruction on the customs of the land. However one should recognize that women of easy virtue are as limited in number here as anywhere else. Many libertines told of exploits whose loves, thought at first to be different, eventually proved to be one and the same.

[There comes the story of the four sailors who, unbeknown to one another, had assignations with the same Kaua'i lady, which shows:]

. . . how clever certain women are, and with what naivety sailors tend to raise a meaningless encounter to the height of a major love affair.

[To correct the poor impression which might have been created by the anecdote, Doctor Thiercelin now tells another.]

Two members of the crew were given hospitality in a hut where two girls between fifteen and sixteen happened to live. Needless to say, these two Hawaiian girls were pretty; anyway a woman is never bad-looking when sixteen. In fact, our two Frenchmen found the Kanaka girls charming. With the greatest pleasure they

accepted their careful attentions. . . . The young girls fanned them, drove mosquitoes away from their faces, lit their pipes, brought them freshly opened coconuts and who knows what else they did not do? . . . So all would have been for the best, had curiosity not taken hold of Eve's little daughters. They wanted to see how the foreigners slept. So in the middle of the night, they left their mats while their mother's closed eyes were no longer watching them, cautiously slipping under the loose partition separating the two rooms, . . . they observed the way they slept under the dim light of the moon. . . . and they started tickling the feet of the sleepers who woke up with a start. Now imagine a young man of twenty-five or thirty suddenly sitting up, rubbing his eyes, half-asleep, and discovering a little sprite squatting down at the end of his bed, watching him with a smile; imagine her half afraid, half encouraged by darkness, her youth, her desires, and you will know what was soon to happen. The young men woke up completely; their hands met, and the new Ruth were attracted by their Boaz, and night became the accomplice to their actions. . . . This adventure had not been brought about by any desire for a gift or profit. It had been inspired by tender feelings which continued throughout our call. . . .

When in your youth you visit a country where manners are so sweet and loving so easy, you will remember it throughout your life with pleasure. As for me, I found at Kaua'i such kind souls, such naively tender and obliging people, so little tainted by the depravity of sea-faring adventurers that, if I imagined the land of innocence, I would place it in that very island.

[There follows another anecdote involving "Mme William," whose skill at massaging headaches away is described and praised.

In his daily walks, Doctor Thiercelin visits the temple and the school and evokes a memorable Sunday Service he attended with the Captain.]

The minister had reserved for us two special seats on a bench under the pulpit. Consequently we were in full view of all, and we even learnt later that we were the main objects of the missionary's address. He was pointing to us as perfect examples of piety, obedience to religious principles, etc. . . . we were turning into models to imitate, and the Kanaka did not stop looking at us. . . . We

could not understand a single word of the address, nor the hymns sung around us. So what could we do? Get bored, yawn, sleep or do silly things; we decided on the last solution, of course. Just at the time when, in a particularly dramatic passage, the missionary reminded the congregation that we had crossed the vast expanse of the sea to come and pray to the Eternal in a humble temple; while the listeners, excited by the preacher's words, were directing their glances towards us with renewed interest, an enormous Kanaka sitting with the choir in the gallery, (he was the choir master), moved forward to get a better look at us. He wore a black coat which was much too tight and short, so that his arms and the tails of his coat perforce stood apart; leaning forward was such an effort that the coat split right down his back. Seeing this, the captain said to me: "Doctor, doctor, that's your coat and it's split." It was indeed my former coat, and unable to stretch sufficiently to accomodate its new owner, it had given up the unequal fight. When we saw the Kanaka's grotesque face looking so disappointed about the enormous tear in his coat, we both were overcome by an uncontrollable fit of laughter and were only able to hide it by bending our heads into our hands to shield ourselves from public curiosity, partly at least. . . .

The school offered more serious and interesting surprises. We had promised our visit for eight or nine a. m. One hour before, a few school-children, twelve to fourteen year olds, climbed up the cliffs surrounding the village, and made the air re-echo with the harsh sounds of clay horns, similar to goat horns; children gathered at that signal. When we arrived at the school—a vast shed without benches or tables—we found two hundred children of both sexes. There we saw exercises which made us forgive the minister for all the petty worries he was inflicting on the population. All the children could read, all could write well enough with chalk on blackboards. All could reckon. Children of ten or twelve could give correct answers to Geography or History questions we asked them. While we were praising the schoolmaster, we kept thinking about our French villages, and wondering who would be the winners of a competition between the sons of the people who consider themselves first in the world, or half-naked young savages.

SECTION II HISTORY OF THE SANDWICH ISLANDS

[The overview of Hawaiian history was mostly acquired from Old William—and interspersed with a few remarks and anecdotes.]

Right through the day, we were the object of the natives' curiosity. So much so that the immediate surroundings of the hut were crowded; we happened to be the first French people who had ever anchored at Kaua'i, and the last large ship which anchored in Waimea Harbor had been American, and that was eighteen years ago. I could see young girls, about sixteen or seventeen years old, who looked much whiter than their friends; people said that their birth had something to do with the foreigners' stay in the island. So everybody wanted to see us. People came in real processions, family after family, endlessly. Natives from Ni'ihau even came in war-canoes, driven only by the desire to see the white foreigners. . . . They were aware that every day ships similar to ours were anchoring at O'ahu. But many natives never went to the capital of the islands. As they had an almost unique opportunity close at hand, most of them made the best of it.

Every night, once we had got rid of the troublesome crowd of visitors we could breathe freely again. I spent practically every evening listening to our host telling me the history of the Hawaiian Islands. . . .

[Doctor Thiercelin tells about the mythical legend of the Hawaiian Islands' origins, of Pele the Fire Goddess, of the Flood which only spared Mauna Kea, and of the priest Paa.²⁴ He evokes historical figures preserved by oral tradition, such as Captain James Cook. Then he gives an accurate description of O'ahu and Kaua'i islands and estimates the Kaua'i population:]

. . . at 10,000 people not counting five or six hundred who live in barely accessible parts. . . . They consider themselves as foreign to the family of Kamehameha, the conqueror. They want to remain independent and on the summits where they barely survive, they retain the religion and laws of their fathers.

[He recalls the port of Waimea, the river, and the old Russian fort, once inhabited by Kaumuali'i, the last King of Kaua'i. Then he tells of Cook's arrival to Waimea and of the religious legend which explained the incredible reception he received and

relates Cook's subsequent visit to Hawai'i and the circumstances of his death. The figure of Kamehameha is recalled together with his conquests and achievements, his intelligent use of able foreigners like Isaac Davis and John Young, and his friendship with Captain George Vancouver.]

When he died in 1819, he could truly say that he had been the only cause and sole agent of the revolution, he had conceived, desired and realized it by himself. However, the country did not suffer painlessly such an important social revolution operated by a native who had no means at his disposal other than strong will-power and European helpers whom he had used without being dominated.

In 1779, Cook had estimated the population of the whole group to be 200,000 people. Fifty years later in 1830, it was about half as much, and kept decreasing. I do not know how much we should trust calculations made rather lightly by the English navigator. There must have been error similar to those made about Tahiti. But whatever the exact number, the population has certainly decreased and the most important cause for this decline must be Kamehameha's conquests. Changing a dynasty or removing kings never happens without many victims. Besides war itself, there are also new weapons. Cannons and grape shot are much more deadly than pahoā [dagger], sling or javelin.

If war had been the only cause for the population decrease in the Sandwich Islands, the gaps would have been filled a long time ago. Kamehameha completed his conquest around 1804, and since then he turned to his civilizing task. The population should have increased, and we should have a figure at least equivalent to Cook's. However everybody agrees that there is a vast difference. Therefore, we shall have to see whether there have been other causes for falling population since the great organizer's death.

Kamehameha's death was accompanied by general mourning. Old William remembered the event as if it had happened yesterday and related it to me with greater feeling than I might have credited him for.

When the great king died, (he said to me), despondency spread throughout Hawai'i; men cried, women covered their bodies with burns and wounds. Pigs were sacrificed, huts destroyed, for the

great king, the conqueror of the whole group of islands had passed away. The hand which lay over the heads of so many kings was frozen for ever.

The news of his death struck his people with stupor. His faithful servants and his comrades in arms remained plunged in grief, and even his former enemies were moved. The giant had died; who would bear his arms from now on? Who would replace him in the battles and the council? Who could carry the weight of such a vast empire divided by the sea? Liholiho his son was too young and powerless. Ka'ahumanu the queen mother, Kamehameha's favorite wife, was plunged in grief. The air rang with her wailing as she lay flat on her front in the royal hut, surrounded by all the other wives and servants. A corrosive purple liquid injected under the skin of her lips, breasts and tongue on sharp thorns, bore witness to her eternal mourning. She cried for she who had formerly been the great king's favorite spouse, was now no more than a widow. She cried, for she used to see him everyday, prepare his poi and pour his 'awa [kava] would only see him again in the clouds later. She cried, for from now on she would never seem him play ulumakia [a bowling game] again—he always won at it—he would never meet the angry seas again as he swam among the breakers on the coast. She cried, for he would never come back to her again, laden with the bodies of the vanquished, his cloak decorated with red flowers, his pahoa covered with the enemies' blood, and in his hands weapons taken during horrible fights. She cried, and hardly lifting her head, now and then she wailed her lament:

Auwe, Auwe, Great Kamehameha is dead.

Dead is the friend of my heart in storm and in stillness.

Dead is the conqueror of all his enemies.

Dead is the friend and favorite of the gods.

He who calmed Pele's fury with a wisp of his tabooed hair is now dead, gone and will come back no more.

He, that mighty Ka'ili made ever victorious, is now dead and his enemies rejoice.

He who pierced through the rocks and stopped the lava-flow, is now dead.

He is dead and his friends grovel in the dust; they forget eating

and drinking; they tattoo their tongues, lips and arms; they cut their hair; they pull out their teeth; they cut their ears, for the great king, the might king is dead. . . .

During the last years of Kamehameha's reign, white immigration had been on the increase. Honolulu the capital of the kingdom was covered with European houses, speculators came from everywhere to try their luck and to bring the people newly accepted into the harmony of civilization, their share of good and bad innovations. In the Sandwich Islands as well as in the whole of Oceania, sexual freedom encouraged the propagation of syphilis, and the spread of this terrible disease must have played an important part in population decline.

A moral revolution was to follow the great social revolution initiated by Kamehameha's powerful impulse; despite the transient evils it caused, it has already brought a prodigious fecundity and will certainly raise the people to a satisfactory position among nations.

In the contacts between natives and foreigners, taboo was the most embarrassing of religious practices. Though he always resisted the English [*sic*] missionaries' requests to change his religion, Kamehameha freed his people from most of the shackles which accompanied daily living by taboo. His son decided to do away with taboo entirely. This important democratic measure almost cost him his throne. Fortunately, Kalanimoku, his Prime Minister and an old companion of his father, saved the son in a fight in which he killed the chief of the rebels, the high-priest of O'ahu who was also the king's cousin. The first step had been taken; in a little time Liholiho, the queen mother and the principal members of his family would convert to Christianity; their example would bring further conversion, idols would crumble and the Hawaiian people would adopt the newly imposed beliefs.

In this social revolution, one fact is particularly striking: Kalanimoku, the Prime Minister, feeling that the reign of the ancient religion had passed, desired also to become a Christian; but one wonders why he resisted the protestant ministers' requests and seized the opportunity of the Uranie's²⁵ arrival to convert to Catholicism.

Everything indicates that the protestant ministers had begun to

lay a heavy hand on the whole nation, and that the old chief, had hoped that in embracing Catholicism, he would neutralize protestant despotism for a while with the help of his co-religionists. He was disappointed in his expectations; the Catholic missionaries kept him waiting too long. When they arrived at O'ahu, they found the place already in the hands of their enemies. In the Hawaiian Islands, Protestantism alone sits in state to this day. By changing the country's habits too fast, the missionaries bear a great responsibility for the population decrease.

If the disgusting scenes of immorality which happened in public under the people's eyes have disappeared, thanks to the missionaries proscribing the use of awa and all fermented liquors, should not degeneration of the race, decrease in fertility and some illnesses like diabetes and obesity, etc. . . . be attributed to the far too exclusive use of water and glutinous drinks? In all human institutions, evil and good can be found side by side. If national songs and erotic dances presented real drawbacks, by forbidding them suddenly and by imposing severe penalties on the transgressions of the new rules, and by paralyzing individual initiative, why was the general impulse given by Kamehameha's example and advice not stopped?

To improve the state of a society, collective spontaneity in the actions of a people engaged in the labours of civilization is required. Therefore it is regrettable that the Hawaiians were so rigorously held in check by the Protestant ministers' severity. However, it would be unfair to deny all progress made and to fail to recognize the conquest over barbarity in so little time. When the missionaries set foot on O'ahu, oral communication only was known; they had no notion of sciences or of other peoples' history; they knew nothing about life beyond the Islands, apart from a few oral traditions from people of the same race living in the other island groups of Oceania.

When the missionaries arrived, they wrote the language, created a dictionary and a grammar; soon the Kanaka learned to read, write and reckon; a little later, they made books, printed them and spread them throughout the Islands.

At Kaua'i, I have seen bibles, treatises of geometry, history books printed at O'ahu, and I was there in 1839. Besides, these

things had been going on for quite a while. Since then, I have read a History of the Islands written by a Kanaka.²⁶ His mystical style reveals that he was a pupil of the Protestants. When you think that a savage's son was able to write such a book, though there has been only one generation since the revolution started, one can only admire such a sudden and complete change.

Political education is being conducted with the same speed. A Parliament has been appointed by the nation; a representative government is working and now that all great powers have agreed to respect the independence of the Sandwich Is., this nation is going to make great strides by itself and will not need to call on the ideas and men of Europe to join in with its ideas and population. Here at least, the race cannot be annihilated, nor replaced by another one; one can even suppose that its progress is going to be fast and give the lie to the general opinion that all colored races are bound to disappear when they come into contact with the white race. It is true to say that, thanks to a special providence, contacts have been fleeting, individual whites only have come, and ideas have been introduced by the power of the word and not by that of the sword.

NOTES

- ¹ Louis Thiercelin, *Journal d'un baleinier*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1866). The unpublished letters are held by direct descendants in family archives in Paris and were made available to me.
- ² Dr. L. Thiercelin, thesis 90973, no. 195, Archives de la Faculté de Médecine, Paris, 1832. It was published as *Essai sur l'intermittence considérée dans l'état de santé et dans l'état de maladie* (Paris: Didot le Jeune, 1832).
- ³ T. Du Pasquier, *Les baleiniers Français au XIX^{ème} Siècle (1814-1868)* (Grenoble: Terre et Mer, 1982) 256.
- ⁴ His marriage contract to his second wife records his first wife's death in Paris on November 21, 1838 and his mother's death at Meung on March 30, 1853. His daughter Marie, aged 17, died at Meung in 1854, and so did his father on November 11, 1856.
- ⁵ Louis Lacroix, *Les Derniers baleiniers français* (Paris: Editions Maritimes et d'Outremer, 1968) 118.
- ⁶ L. Thiercelin, *Journal d'un baleinier*, vol. 1 (Genève: Editions Vernoy, Idégraf, 1979): 172-75.
- ⁷ Mercy Whitney, Journal, 23 and 30 Sept. and 10 and 15 Oct. 1839, ms., HMCS. "Miss," if an abbreviation for Mission, would refer to the "Laplace

- affair," when Captain C. P. T. Laplace called at Honolulu with the French naval frigate *Artémise* from 8 to 20 July 1839. Laplace, who was anti-missionary, forced a treaty on the government of Kamehameha III: see R. S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom, 1778-1854*, vol. 1, *Foundation and Transformation* (Honolulu: U P of Hawaii, 1938): 165-67.
- ⁸ Mercy Whitney, Journal, 20 July 1839, comments again on the Laplace incident, "Popery is now fully established at these islands at the mouth of French cannon."
- ⁹ A substantial lava rock fort was built at Waimea in 1816-1817 by the Russian representative of the Russian American Company, with the help of Kaumuali'i, King of Kaua'i. It was dismantled in 1864. See Edward Joesting, *Kaua'i: The Separate Kingdom* (U of Hawaii P, 1984), hereinafter cited as Joesting, *Kaua'i*.
- ¹⁰ *Broussonetia papyrifera* or *wauke*: Mary Kawena Pukui and Samuel H. Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1986); hereinafter cited as Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ¹¹ Could this "William" be John Williams, one of the three sailors left on Kaua'i by Captain John Kendrick in October 1791 to search for sandalwood and pearls? If he was a young man in 1791, he would be in his 70s in 1839. He is mentioned twice in Mercy Whitney's Journal, Sept. 1839, as "old man William." AH has no record of his birth or marriage. However, in the Register of Deaths, the following are listed p. 95 C 3:
 —"Williams, J. Polynesian. 1840, Nov. 21, died Waimea, Kauai, Nov. 5. Resident of Wales, England."
 —"Williams, Maiarua, Polynesian, 1851 Oct. 4, died Sept. 24, 1851. Wife of John Williams."
 Would John Williams (1791), old man William (1839), and John Williams who died at Waimea in 1840 be the same person and Doctor Thiercelin's host?
- ¹² Kamehameha I was born 1758 and became ruler of Hawai'i in 1795-1796. He died in May 1819 after conquering most of the Hawaiian Islands and unifying them under his rule, but he failed to conquer Kaua'i. However, the King of Kaua'i accepted giving allegiance to him.
- ¹³ This unusual spelling for "Maori" occurs also in Leconte de Lisle, "Le Dernier des Maourys," 1836, a poem directly inspired by chapter VI, sections 2 and 3 of *Journal d'un Baleinier*. See C. Mortelier, "Du 'vieux chieff' de Thiercelin au 'Dernier des Maourys' de Leconte de Lisle, *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France*, 2 (1990): 180-90.
- ¹⁴ *mamaki* (*Pipturus* spp.), Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ¹⁵ (*Pandanus odoratissimus*), Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ¹⁶ A humorous play on the French word "*gouvernante*" which means a child's nurse or governess; here a made-up feminine form for *gouverneur* (governor).
- ¹⁷ Kauikaeouli, Liholiho's youngest brother, who succeeded him in 1825 and reigned over the Islands until 1854 as Kamehameha III.
- ¹⁸ Kaikioewa (1765-1839), the appointed guardian of Kauikaeouli, made Governor in 1825 until he was replaced as interim Governor by his wife Keaweamahī in 1839: Samuel Whitney, Waimea Station Report, 1839, ts., HMCS.

- ¹⁹ Reverend Samuel Whitney (1793-1845). His name was transcribed as "Wit-neh" by Thiercelin. He had great influence with the Kaua'i chiefs and provided leadership and guidance to the people of Kaua'i in the troubled years following Kaumuali'i's death. His wife, Mercy Partridge Whitney (1795-1872), lived in Waimea during all her years in Hawai'i and noted in her journal many of the events that took place on Kaua'i.
- ²⁰ It was the third house the Whitneys inhabited on Kaua'i.
- ²¹ A French expression coined after the title of a vaudeville composed in 1837 in which a female character vanishes into thin air.
- ²² *kukui*, candlenut (*Aleurites moluccana*), Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ²³ *panini*, cactus (*Opuntia megacantha*), Pukui and Elbert, *Hawaiian Dictionary*.
- ²⁴ Joesting, *Kaua'i* 29-31 and 18.
- ²⁵ The French vessel *Uranie*, on a world scientific expedition, spent 20 days in Hawaiian waters in 1819: Bernice Judd and Helen Y. Lind, *Voyages to Hawaii Before 1860* (Honolulu: UP of Hawaii, 1974).
- ²⁶ Thiercelin is likely referring to David Malo (1787-1853), *Ka Moololo Hawaii*, 1838, trans. by Jules Remy as *Histoire de l'archipel Hawaïen (îles Sandwich)* . . . (Paris: A. Franck, 1862). Doctor Thiercelin might have read it when it came out.

